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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWE MEDIA UNDER SIEGE

¶11. (U) SUMMARY: The conditions for independent media in Zimbabwe continue to worsen. Harassment of journalists by Zimbabwe government (GOZ) state agencies continues. Despite the recent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between President Robert Mugabe and the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), the GOZ continues to restrict freedom of expression and target independent newspapers to silence criticism. Taxes imposed on foreign publications have eliminated some newspapers and unless removed, threaten the survival of other publications. Economic conditions in Zimbabwe present a further threat to the survival of independent newspapers in Zimbabwe. END SUMMARY.

Government Continues to Harass Independent Media

¶12. (U) On July 10 the Magistrate's Court dismissed an application to remove the remand order from "The Standard" newspaper and its editor Davison Maruziva. The newspaper and its editor are being charged, along with opposition leader Arthur Mutambara, with communicating falsehoods prejudicial to the State and contempt of court. The GOZ has not provided the newspaper's lawyers with required evidence from the police logs to prepare for the trial. Charges against the paper, Maruziva and Mutambara arose on April 20 following publication of the opposition leader's opinion article titled "A Shameful Betrayal of National Independence." The trial continues on August 28.

¶13. (SBU) Al-Jazeera Bureau Chief Cyrus Nhara told us that he has been summoned several times by GOZ Ministry of Information officials for what they routinely term "administrative meetings." During the meetings, GOZ officials threateningly raise spurious compliance issues concerning Al-Jazeera's accreditation and the non-renewal of the contract of a former Al-Jazeera employee, Supa Mandiwanzira, a known ZANU-PF sympathizer. Ordinarily such issues would be handled by the Media and Information Commission. Despite this continued harassment, Al-Jazeera's accreditation hasn't been removed and the news agency was the only media outlet to provide live coverage of the signing ceremony between Zanu-PF and the two MDC formations on July 21, 2008.

¶14. (U) Several independent journalists and foreign correspondents were barred from covering the signing ceremony of the MOU between ZANU-PF and the two MDC formations at the Rainbow Towers Hotel on July 21. GOZ-controlled media described the decision to prohibit the presence of these journalists, and western diplomats, as avoiding an intrusion which President Robert Mugabe had warned Zimbabweans to guard against.

Punitive Taxes Affecting Foreign Publications

¶15. (SBU) The import tax on foreign newspapers introduced by the GOZ in early June has forced one independent newspaper, "The Zimbabwean," to stop printing its Sunday edition. Wilf Mbanga, publisher and editor of the newspaper, printed in South Africa, told us that they are paying 42,650 Rand (USD 5,786) for 60,000 copies, the newspaper's current print run. The newspaper was forced to reduce the print run to 60,000 each week from 200,000 before the

imposition of the taxes. Mbanga told us that the taxes are actually more than the 40 percent announced publicly by the GOZ. The newspaper also pays 15 percent Value Added Tax (VAT) and 15 percent super-tax on top of the duty, making the total 70 percent. Mbanga said they suspended the Sunday edition as they would have exhausted their annual budget within two months. The newspaper paid 500,000 Rand (USD 67,827) in June alone - because they were sending the usual 200,000 on Thursdays and 60,000 on Sundays.

**Spiraling printing charges
force newspapers to reduce print run**

¶16. (SBU) Independent newspapers publishing in Zimbabwe report a reduction in their print runs as a result of increases in printing charges. Sources report that the cost of printing rose 6,414 percent between June 27 and July 26. Zimind group CEO Raphael Khumalo described the increasing prices as "cost opportunism run riot" that could result in the shutting down of the two newspapers Zimind publishes, "The Standard (every Sunday) and the "Zimbabwe Independent" (every Friday).

¶17. (SBU) COMMENT: Despite the on-going talks between Robert Mugabe and the MDC, we expect the GOZ will continue curtailing the free flow of information and criticism. Morale among independent journalists is extremely low. The GOZ continues to cultivate a climate of fear that has increased self-censorship. It will require a major effort to cultivate a culture of truly independent journalism. END COMMENT.

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